

School inspection from the other side of the fence

Initially, when Julie contacted me, I was enthusiastic and 'fired up' to speak out about all that is wrong with Ofsted. I very recently retired, and I have newfound energy to fight the system, which I know deep inside to be damaging for our future generations of children. However, when it came to putting down the words, I repeatedly couldn't bring myself to do it! I now look back over the past few months and believe I am only just now recovering from my own internal exhaustion as a headteacher and the damage caused by the systems imposed on the role I loved so much. I am going through a whole change - that of reevaluating my purpose and value in society... working life completed and end of a career. Since leaving the profession, I have joined a school as a governor, and I remain as committed to every child a learner as I ever was. I aim to be a fully involved governor who understands and engages with all things learning whilst also offering support and challenge. The hours I have put into school visits, meetings, reading of documents and more demonstrate my eager commitment to the school, and I enjoy it immensely. However, the same passion does not exist, and I do not have the same dread I used to have as a headteacher when waiting for 'the call', although the call is imminent. My commitment feels more detached and less personal, one of being more objective and less deeply involved emotionally. This is a feeling which resonates with other governors I have spoken to. At this early stage of my new role and from speaking to numerous governors from various schools, my raw analysis is that it is the emotional and so deeply personal attachment to one's own school which leads to the dread and fear of an inspection that a headteacher feels.

As a newly co-opted Governor and recently retired primary school headteacher, my views of Ofsted are merging and changing. All the inspections I have been involved in have had good or outstanding outcomes, but the lasting impression is one of relief rather than celebration.

The role and experience of a person within the education system form their opinion in determining whether Ofsted is effective and has a valued part to play in our children's lives. The varying views lead to valid debates which should impact improvements to the systems. However, this is dependent on all views and voices being listened to and valued.

As a headteacher, my lasting recollections of inspection are ones of fear and abject worry. Memories of reconciling my own educational philosophy and endless working hours with the expectations of 'a visit' after listening to fellow colleagues' experiences, reading reflections and feedback, the changing Ofsted handbook, published reports, attending CPD, research... the list seems endless! Recollections of all this whilst waiting for 'the call' at the same time as maintaining the relentless workload and high expectations of the daily commitment remain with me to this day!

As a headteacher, I was committed to the highest quality education and care for every young learner and their curriculum provision. This included providing a truly broad and rich curriculum which prepares all children with solid foundations for their learning journey. My ultimate aim was to equip them with the life experiences, skills and knowledge they would need for the next step in their education and towards a future where they are able to make their own life choices.

In my new governor world, I see and understand the behaviours of a self-motivated but highly anxious headteacher before me...the actions are clearly evident and understood. Repeated conversations and dialogue about children's learning being central, but the practice clearly demonstrates it is all catalogued for a higher body with systems of checking, described as accountability. These checks include data returns, SATS and their preparation, a range of questionnaires, parent workshops, displays, subject leader monitoring reports, etc., all aimed at providing evidence. Even community engagement, photographs collected, Twitter and other social media avenues feed the monster of providing evidence for the fateful phone call and visit. All are to be maintained and kept up to date and current. The workload and pressure are immense on the headteacher. The role of a governor requires dedicated commitment and time, given freely, but usually in addition to personal, professional and family commitments. Governors are skilled people from all walks of life who voluntarily provide high challenge and low threat (Mary Myatt) and are equally judged by inspectors.

A governor's role includes monitoring standards and being responsible for the headteacher's well-being- how can this juxtaposed role work? It can't! One adds to pressure and workload whilst simultaneously paying lip service, no matter how well meant it is, to the real well-being of the school leaders who, in turn, are balancing their own well-being and that of their wider staff. All this is in addition to supporting the school's pupils and parental community. All of this, and more, adds to the burden and takes a toll on the headteacher's health.

The governor's role within a school feels more distanced and less directly responsible in the build-up to an inspection when the window is open. After researching and discussing Ofsted's impact & implications, my view is that governors, although the employer with responsibility, are blissfully unaware of the real day-to-day school management and pressures which wear a headteacher down emotionally until the tank is empty. They read what feels like endless prepared documents and are 'coached' so they are fully aware of expectations and the questions which may arise. I have heard Governors talking about learning their lines so everyone is singing from the same hymn sheet! They can work together as a group of governors and are reported on collectively, but the headteacher is named and identified, bringing greater pressure and ownership. As a headteacher, it is the personal pride and commitment to 'my' school which builds Ofsted tensions and contributes to what feels like the ultimate threat of potential failure. A decision made by strangers and one which is imposed for the world to see. In less than 48 hours, a lifetime's work can be destroyed! This is not a feeling a governor can identify with. A role which drops in and out of the school pleasures and pressures.

There needs to be a revised re-set of inspection. One which feels more supportive and developmental, rather than the finite, judgemental system in place. More frequent, less high-stakes visits would provide a better understanding of school improvement over time, and the impact on learners would positively improve. The intertwined published data and Ofsted inspections lead towards an established way of teaching - 'performing' like an outdated circus act, even though in your heart you know it's wrong.

We all aim to provide a valuable public service (whether as a volunteer governor, vocational career headteacher or Ofsted inspector) and should be accountable and transparent in our daily commitment to learners and education. However, the current system, which is an industry in itself, is not the way to a brighter future for our young, lifelong learners.

So why do we do it? Why do we accept a broken system that we know is negatively impacting learners and the teaching profession? I can only assume that we do it because we believe in the future. Our roles are to guide and nurture future generations, but Ofsted does little to help this. It is a hurdle to be jumped! A hurdle which changes height and distances between visits.

I am now rebuilding the 'who am I' and getting to know a new me with a different identity as a person, not a role or job, which had, over time, swallowed the personality that was me. I am now seeing a brighter new future ahead personally. I frequently reflect on the ever-evolving educational systems and developments during my past career. Ones which a busy profession strives to deliver rather than question. We are not the free-thinking and developed nation we proudly claim to be; we are shaped and moulded by a system. A system in which, as the years go by, 'A little bit of loveliness drops off each day' (John Bishop) ... and we don't even see it happening!

I look back sentimentally but look at the present and the future of education with concerns. I see how it has evolved, and it is continually changing but, sadly, not always improving for all learners. All voices in education are not equally heard or valued, and some leaders don't even have the headspace or time to reflect!

In writing this think piece, I used my own 37 years of educational experience, from teacher to HT, LA consultant and advisor, plus my more recent role as school co-opted governor. I spoke to governors from five different schools and used their comments and views to conclude that they are less impacted by Ofsted than the headteacher but that they care passionately about the learners in their care and would continue to do so if Ofsted disappeared today. Inspection has changed over the years since its conception, and in its bid to become more consistent and effective, it has become more of an industry in its own right, one which is distanced from learners' needs by developing a self-important, one size fits all approach.

How can we improve education for our learners? Whether as a governor, headteacher or inspector:

Evaluate... what is really happening.

Engage... with those who matter.

Enable... true learning to take place.

Liz Irvin, governor, former headteacher

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